

The big question: Will Tony Blair take paternity leave? [GB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

For Tony Blair, the personal just got political.

The tricky issue of paternity leave has left the prime minister with an unenviable dilemma: take time off for the birth of his fourth child and risk Tory accusations of leaving the country in the lurch; or stay working and endure the ire of a regiment of female MPs and - most importantly - his wife.

With the next Blair babe due on May 24, the expectant father yesterday admitted that he has not decided whether to take up paternity leave.

He confessed to fellow father-to-be John Humphrys (not planning to take leave) on Radio 4's Today programme: "To be completely honest, I haven't thought about it properly yet. I know I should have, and I am sure I will. I will decide in the next few weeks. I know I have got to decide soon."

For Mr Blair, there is no easy way out. If he opts to stay at his desk in No 10 while his wife Cherie copes with the new baby in the private apartments upstairs, family campaigners and many of his own parliamentary party will be outraged.

Politically, the fallout could be even more enduring, since it will be widely concluded that the prime minister dare not trust his fellow cabinet members to run the country in his absence. Asked whether there was not a strong case for paternity leave, Mr Blair replied: "Of course there is - but I have got to make sure that the country is properly run too."

Take time out, however, and he faces opposition jibes that he has left John Prescott, his deputy, in charge of the country just as the Northern Ireland peace process hits a new crisis with the May 22 decommissioning deadline. He will also be out of the picture just as Ken Livingstone could be stretching his wings as the new London mayor.

Last night Mr Prescott was relishing the prospect of a go at the helm: "Anything I can do to help I certainly will," he said.

Mr Blair dismissed the idea that he did not have confidence in his deputy. "It's not a lack of confidence in anyone, I just haven't made up my mind."

While the prime minister dithers, Cherie Booth this week made clear her preference. Addressing fellow lawyers at King's College, London, she said she expected her husband to follow the lead of the prime minister of Finland, Paavo Lipponen, who has twice taken paternity leave. "I, for one, am promoting the widespread adoption of his fine example," she said.

Earlier this month, Mr Lipponen, 58, took a week of paternity leave to help care for his newborn daughter. Unlike Mr Blair, he has not put in an appearance at this week's EU summit in Lisbon, though whether because of family commitments or exhaustion was unclear last night.

Many female Labour MPs backed Ms Booth. Fiona Mactaggart, MP for Slough and a supporter of family-friendly workplace reforms, said: "Of course he has got to take some leave, and I think he will, though I suspect he will do it in a sheepish way."

She offered sympathy, however, for the prime minister's dilemma. "We must not be mean to him. All the men are grumbling 'it's all right for him' or calling him a dosser; women are saying 'do it, do it' and Cherie is giving him big grief."

Harriet Harman, who along with Mr Blair was given permission by the whips while in opposition to miss some votes to spend time with her young children, also urged Mr Blair to take some leave: "He is not unique as a prime minister, but he is unique as the father of that baby."

Another senior female MP said: "All this Prescott panic stuff is nonsense, anyway: he might do PMQs but he won't be in charge while Tony's away - Gordon [Brown] will."

Campaign groups for women and families are also leaning on the prime minister. Mary-Anne Stephenson, of the Fawcett Society, said: "Taking leave would be an excellent signal to other men and other employers that no job is so important that you can't afford time off to spend with a newborn child."

Ms Harman and other women MPs are also pushing for a new right to up to 13 weeks' parental leave, available to all mothers and fathers of

children born after December 15 last year, to become a paid entitlement.

The government's own figures indicate that only 2% of men are likely to take up the right if they must forfeit their salary, and the trade and industry secretary, Stephen Byers, is to examine the option of payment as part of a review of maternity and parental rights announced in this week's Budget.

The Department of Trade and Industry was last night explaining to all who would listen that Britain has no statutory right to paternity leave. A new right to take time off in "family emergencies" is billed by the department as enshrining the entitlement to time off for the baby's arrival.

Mr Blair, as an office holder under the crown rather than an employee, has no written contract and can in theory take time off to suit himself. If he does take leave in May, he will be paid, as are all MPs who take paternity leave.

That will unnerve business leaders, and provoke further Tory mockery.

However the prime minister deals with his dilemma, the Commons is never likely to return to the old days when MPs would receive a call from the hospital informing them of their new baby's arrival and would announce it to Commons committees to a round of applause.

Bringing up baby: the pros and cons of the PM taking paternity leave

- He would win the instant approval of women at Westminster and beyond, not to mention Cherie - but it wouldn't do to appear under her thumb in the heartlands. Careful spin required.
- He would enjoy the unique pleasure of bonding with the child in its first week of life - but as the PM plays with his fourth-born, Mayor Livingstone could be playing havoc with London. The mayoral vote is on May 4, and should Ken win he'll milk the victory for all its worth.
- By being at home the PM can delay hiring a new nanny for another week. After the travails of Ros Mark and "Nannygate" this may be a welcome delay. Uncle Peter may be too busy with the Northern Ireland peace process to pop round. The latest deadline for decommissioning is May 22, two days before the baby is due.
- Blair would appear every inch the well-rounded modern family man, comfortable with early day motions whether they come at Westminster or in the nursery - but he's bound to come under fire from the Tory leadership, where paternity leave is not an issue.
- While the PM refamiliarises himself with changing nappies, John Prescott would have to refamiliarise himself with running the country. William Hague would relish taking on the deputy prime minister's notoriously creative grammar at the despatch box.
- During his week off Mr Blair will be able to play the child lullabies on his Fender Stratocaster. At the weekend he told a Sunday magazine that a passion for rock n' roll was his one remaining vice
- There is a precedent: the Finnish prime minister, Paavo Lipponen, has just returned to work after his second spell of paternity leave. In his absence the highly articulate finance minister, Sauli Niinisto, took charge. The Finnish embassy said that "nothing important" happened while Mr Lipponen was off.

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